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The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa`ida and its Affiliates

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nce Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed
d injured another eight individuals at Naval Air
iry 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

(AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack. It is not yet clear whether the group had a direct role in the attack, but if it did, it would make the shooting the first deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11 directed by a foreign terrorist organization. Alshamrani's repurposing of the words of Osama bin Ladin and Anwar al-Awlaki in a social media posting just prior to the attack point to the enduring influence of al-Qa`ida propaganda. As the Federal Bureau of Investigation seeks to gain access to Alshamrani's Apple iPhones, which may help it ascertain what role, if any, AQAP played in the attack, the U.S. Department of Defense is conducting a comprehensive review of security cooperation activities with foreign countries.

AL-SHABAAB

On Friday, December 6, 2019, a 21-year-old Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant named Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani murdered three U.S. Navy sailors and injured eight others in an unprovoked attack at Naval Air Station Pensacola in the Florida panhandle.¹ The shooting occurred in a classroom building.²

VIOLENT FAR RIGHT TERRORISM

"During the attack, the shooter fired shots at pictures of the current U.S. president and a former president, and a witness at the scene recounted that he made statements critical of American military action overseas," according to FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich.³

SINGLE ISSUE TERRORISM

Alshamrani, who hailed from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province of Al Ahsa, was killed by one of two local sheriff's deputies who arrived at the scene as first responders.⁴ He was also

confronted by two unarmed Marines and a Navy airman who was shot five times.⁵ The shooting lasted approximately 15 minutes.⁶

EDUCATION

In mid-January 2020, U.S. Attorney General William Barr labeled the shooting an act of terrorism.⁷ After the shooting, it was discovered that Alshamrani was a follower of al-Qa`ida propaganda, including lectures from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki.⁸ Just prior to the attack,⁹ Alshamrani posted an anti-American message on his Twitter account, which repurposed the words of al-Awlaki as well as longtime al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin.¹⁰ In the posting, the attacker openly denounced the policies of the United States and Israel. Before the attack, he also retweeted articles that referenced Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians and a tweet referencing the Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.¹¹

DOWNING SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Nearly two months after the attack, on February 2, 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula released a video claiming "adoption" of the attack.¹² The video features a message from beyond the grave from Qassim al-Rimi, the AQAP emir who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in January 2020 in Yemen, according to an official statement released by the White House.¹³ In the tape, al-Rimi stated, "Alshamrani carried out his martyrdom operation on one of the dens of evil ... the US Naval Air Station Pensacola."¹⁴

PRACTITIONER EDUCATION

"Our hero moved for several years between several U.S. military bases in America to select his target among them. He searched for his prey. Allah bestowed on him great patience," al-Rimi stated.¹⁵

EDITORIAL BOARD

The video noticeably failed to explicitly spell out the nature of the connection between Alshamrani and AQAP. It did, however, display a screen grab of an apparent iPhone Notes document timestamped September 6, 2019, purportedly containing Alshamrani's last will and testament addressed to his family.¹⁶ (See bottom-right image in Figure 1.)

ABOUT

"If you have received this message while I am imprisoned, be patient and do not feel weak ... And if Allah graced me with death, I ask Allah to accept me as a martyr for His sake," the document reads. "I assure you that the issue is not an adolescent mindset or excessiveness and extremism in takfir [excommunication from Islam]. Instead, it is a way out for the crisis that the Islamic ummah [worldwide community] is experiencing for close to a century now."

INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

AQAP does not offer proof that Alshamrani is the author of the last will and testament, and Alshamrani never references AQAP in the document. Still, faking such a document would be risky on theological grounds, even for a terrorist group.

← CLOSE

RESEARCH ▾

EDUCATION

CTC SENTINEL

The AQAP video also featured a quote, written out by the group on the screen, from what it claimed was the "correspondence of the martyr."¹⁷

"During the last month I was in preparation for this program. I started last Friday running tests and I passed it all thanks to God. Starting on Monday there will be swimming tests for a week. Then there will be academy tests for five weeks. The program graduates a batch every week."¹⁸ The battery of physical tests is a common part of the training associated with the program that

Alshamrani was enrolled in, something that would be difficult for AQAP to have specific knowledge of if the correspondence was fabricated.¹⁹

Taken at face value, this could suggest Alshamrani had been in contact with AQAP. However, the group did not explicitly state that the message was sent to them by Alshamrani, nor did the group provide any images of correspondence in its original form.

The AQAP video also included pictures purportedly showing Alshamrani, a picture apparently taken with photographic flash of a framed letter purportedly addressed to Alshamrani from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Armed Forces office acknowledging his level of English-language learning, and a picture of a purported “Certificate of Completion” of an “aviation preflight indoctrination course” from the U.S. Naval Aviation Schools Command. This is another aspect of the video that would have been difficult, yet not impossible, for AQAP to fake.²⁰

In probing the connectivity between the attacker and AQAP, one possible avenue of inquiry for the FBI has been ascertaining the authenticity of these documents and whether they existed in the public domain prior to AQAP’s release of the video. Although this author is not in a position to confirm the authenticity of the documents and photos used in the video, the totality of what AQAP showed in the video *appears* to point to at least some connectivity between AQAP and the attacker.

It is important to note that if this attack were directed, and not merely inspired by AQAP, it would be the first successful directed attack on U.S. soil by a foreign terrorist organization since 9/11.²¹

The main gate at Naval Air Station Pensacola on Navy Boulevard in Pensacola, Florida, is pictured on March 16, 2016. (Patrick Nichols/U.S. Navy)

Alshamrani arrived in the United States in August 2017 on an A-2 Visa for military training.²² He was initially stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, for English-language instruction.²³ After Lackland, Alshamrani moved on to aviation training in Pensacola and eventually advanced strike fighter training in the fall of 2019.²⁴ Although Alshamrani filed a formal complaint against one of his instructors for repeatedly mocking him with a nickname, “Porn Stash,” a moniker that apparently infuriated him,²⁵ investigators believe that the attack was premeditated and not a result of this incident, as evidenced by the U.S. government’s terrorism label. There is also AQAP’s claim that Alshamrani had been planning the attack for years and scouting various targets.²⁶ Indeed, Alshamrani was interested in extremist videos, literature, and social media postings as early as 2015.²⁷ While he was in the United States for training in July 2019, Alshamrani used a hunting license to legally purchase a 9mm Glock 45 handgun.^b

The week before the attack, Alshamrani and three other Saudi military trainees traveled to New York City, visiting several museums and Rockefeller Center.²⁸ On this trip, Alshamrani also visited the September 11th Memorial in New York City. Months prior to his December 2019 visit

to New York City, Alshamrani posted a cryptic message on the internet on September 11, 2019, noting that “the countdown has started.”²⁹ The evening before the attack, Alshamrani hosted a dinner party where he showed videos of mass shootings.³⁰ Attorney General William Barr subsequently made clear that while several fellow Saudi Air Force officers attending the training facility took videos of the attack’s aftermath, reports that they filmed the attack as it unfolded

were false and that they had fully cooperated with investigators.³¹ At least one of the individuals who attended the dinner party was among those who filmed the aftermath of the attack.³²

This article examines several issues raised by the attack. First, it analyzes the enduring influence of al-Qa`ida propaganda and how it continues to resonate with the group’s supporters. This section also examines the degree to which the attack may provide an opening for al-Qa`ida to reassert itself among jihadis around the world and renew its appeal to jihadis in Saudi Arabia. Second, it discusses the impact the attack may have on U.S.-Saudi relations, which has experienced particular volatility over the past several years. Third, it explores the issue of foreign military personnel vetting in the United States and whether a stricter and more rigorous vetting regime will allow Washington to be able to sustain the rate at which it trains military personnel from Saudi Arabia and other partner countries in the continuing fight against terrorism. Fourthly and finally, the article looks at how the attack will impact the privacy-security debate, especially given the inability of investigators to gain access to the attacker’s iPhone.³³

Figure 1 (below): Still images from the video “And Heal the Breasts of a Believing People: Blessing and Declaration of Responsibility for the Attack on the US Naval Air Station Pensacola Florida” released by AQAP’s al-Malahem Media Foundation on February 2, 2020. The pictures (which the author has not authenticated) purport to show Mohammed Alshamrani in military uniform as well as part of his last will and testament (apparently written on the iPhone Notes App). The screen captures also include images of now deceased AQAP leader Qassim al-Rimi.

Issue 1: The Enduring al-Qa`ida Threat

Just prior to the attack, a Twitter account with the handle @M7MD_SHAMRANI, believed to belong to Alshamrani, posted a message criticizing the United States and Israel and accusing the United States of crimes against Muslims, with references to Guantanamo and the presence of U.S. troops in Muslim nations. Although Alshamrani opted not to refer to any al-Qa`ida leaders by name, his message repurposed the words of bin Ladin and AQAP’s longtime American propagandist, until his death in 2011, Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁴

Al-Awlaki's influence has been a key factor in some of the most significant terrorist attacks of the past decade, including the Boston Marathon bombings (2013), the Charlie Hebdo attack (2015), the San Bernardino shootings (2015), and the Orlando nightclub massacre (2016), in addition to numerous other attacks.³⁵ Despite highly publicized efforts to remove terrorist

content from the internet, his sermons glorifying “martyrs” and calling for attacks against the West can still be accessed on YouTube and other social media platforms.³⁶

The Pensacola attacker's social media account echoed some of al-Qa`ida's key themes, including anger over the presence of U.S. troops in the Muslim world and U.S. support for Israel. These themes have been a mainstay of al-Qa`ida propaganda since the group's inception, and as recently as the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the organization's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called for attacks on the West, specifically against the U.S. military.³⁷

The Pensacola shooter reportedly gravitated toward social media postings that described Americans and Israelis as “crusaders” and openly celebrated the concept of jihad.³⁸ *The Washington Post* reported that by late 2015, Alshamrani followed several well-known extremist ideologues on Twitter, including Saudi nationals Abdulaziz al-Turaifi and Ibrahim al-Sakran, Kuwaiti Hakim al-Mutairi, and Jordanian Eyad Qunaibi.³⁹ The newspaper reported that these individuals are alleged to have varying degrees of association with jihadi ideology and networks.⁴⁰ Al-Turaifi was arrested in 2016 after criticizing the Saudi government for stripping the Saudi religious police of their powers, *The Jerusalem Post's* Maayan Groisman reported. Groisman noted that al-Turaifi's arrest was decried by al-Qa`ida ideologues, including Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a Saudi cleric then affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴¹ Al-Sakran was detained in 2016 and accused of having links to terrorist organizations.⁴² Al-Mutairi is a religious scholar and Secretary General of Saudi Arabia's al-Ummah party, which is banned in the Kingdom.⁴³ According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, al-Mutairi is a charismatic figure who established a network of activist salafis in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, Qunaibi, who *The New York Times* described as a jihadi theoretician, took the opportunity to complain that attacks against non-Muslims are always given more media attention than attacks against Muslims.⁴⁵ As with the Pensacola attack, the Charlie Hebdo attack was claimed by AQAP.⁴⁶ *McClatchy* noted that Qunaibi was a supporter of Jabhat al-Nusra, previously al-Qa`ida's franchise in Syria.⁴⁷

Most of the recent terrorist attacks on U.S. soil motivated by jihadi ideology have had connections to the Islamic State, not al-Qa`ida or its affiliates. If the continuing investigation concludes that the Pensacola attack was directed by AQAP, not only would it be the first successful FTO-directed attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001, but it could also signal that AQAP retains the capability, albeit limited, to launch high-profile external operations despite facing numerous setbacks in terms of fragmentation and leadership decapitation.⁴⁸

Whether AQAP's claims to have directed the attack turn out to be true or false, the Alshamrani attack still provided the group with a boost, elevating it in the jihadi propaganda sphere and

providing the overall al-Qa`ida network with leverage as it competes with the Islamic State as the most prominent global jihadi brand. Following the death of al-Rimi, AQAP selected Khaled bin Umar Batarfi as its new leader, and given his role as the former head of the group's external operations unit, this could signal a renewed emphasis on attacking the West.⁴⁹

With the Islamic State still reeling from the loss of its caliphate, there may be an opening for al-Qa`ida to seize momentum and portray itself and its affiliates as again capable of something the Islamic State was never able to achieve—directing a successful attack inside the United States—in the competition for recruits and prestige.⁵⁰ This may help it recruit in Saudi Arabia in particular because the country has historically been what the scholar Thomas Hegghammer termed “a heartland of al-Qaeda support.”⁵¹ Other longtime analysts of Saudi Arabia, including Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, have noted that “the al-Qaeda message about its historically intimate relationship with the United States resonates with many Saudis who have a deep antipathy for the United States.”⁵²

Saudi Arabia continues to grapple with a major radicalization challenge. More than 3,000 Saudi foreign fighters traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State and other terrorist groups.⁵³ Before that, throughout the mid- to late 2000s, a significant number of Saudis traveled to Iraq to fight with al-Qa`ida in Iraq and other Sunni jihadi groups battling U.S. troops.⁵⁴ It remains unclear how pervasive support for al-Qa`ida and other jihadi groups is within the Saudi armed forces.

As al-Qa`ida works to reassert itself in 2020 and beyond, the group could seek to redouble its efforts in the Kingdom, particularly looking to garner sympathy or curry favor with those in Saudi society who strongly oppose Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reform agenda. In order to refashion the country's image from an exporter of radical Wahhabism to a moderate nation attractive to foreign direct investment, the Crown Prince has begun to relax some social mores, hosting rock concerts and inviting so-called influencers to praise Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination.⁵⁵ Underlining the continued al-Qa`ida threat to Saudi Arabia, at a concert in November 2019, a man identified only as a 33-year-old Yemeni resident according to Saudi state television, working under orders from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, went on a stabbing spree, attacking performers at King Abdullah Park in Riyadh.⁵⁶ One dimension to the Pensacola attack that will likely particularly worry Saudi authorities is the fact that the attacker was a serving member of the Royal Saudi Air Force.

Issue 2: The Impact on U.S.-Saudi Relations

While the attack may have created an opening for al-Qa`ida, it has not undermined the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. President Trump was quick to praise Saudi Arabia after the attack as a stalwart ally and seek to reassure the Kingdom. On Twitter, Trump noted that “The King said that the Saudi people are greatly angered by the barbaric actions of the shooter, and that this person in no way shape or form represents the feelings of the Saudi people who love the American people.”⁵⁷ Attorney General Barr acknowledged that the Saudis were playing a useful role in assisting the investigation. In a hastily assembled internal report analyzing the assailant's Twitter feed, the Saudi government blamed clerics

considered enemies of the ruling regime, in particular those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, for exerting a negative influence on Alshamrani.⁵⁸

More than a year ago, a Saudi hit team acting at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, murdered U.S. resident and prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Istanbul consulate, the CIA reportedly assessed with a high degree of confidence.⁵⁹ The Saudis attempted to cover up the crime but were later exposed for the brutal murder.⁶⁰ Citing the Khashoggi killing and the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has killed untold numbers of Yemeni civilians, the U.S. Congress has pushed for a reduction in military aid to the Saudis, something the White House has consistently resisted. Late in 2019, the U.S. State Department reportedly rejected a plan to train the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), as Saudi intelligence is known, because it is widely believed that Riyadh continues its campaign to silence dissidents abroad and arrest human rights activists.⁶¹

In October 2019, the United States announced plans to deploy nearly 2,000 more troops to Saudi Arabia to counter Iran and reinforce support for Riyadh following the September 2019 missile attack against Saudi oil facilities suspected to have been conducted by Iran.⁶² Following the January 3, 2020, strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani and the further increase in tensions between Washington and Tehran, more U.S. troops were mobilized to the Middle East.⁶³ The move to send more troops to Saudi Arabia specifically might be seized upon by al-Qa`ida, which used the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia as one of its primary justifications for attacking the United States.⁶⁴ But the relationship between Washington and Riyadh is an enduring one, as the Saudi ruling family depends on the United States for “protection and preservation,” which in turn makes the country’s leadership an enduring target for jihadi groups like al-Qa`ida.⁶⁵ One of bin Ladin’s long-stated goals was to overthrow the Saudi monarchy, which he came to consider an apostate regime.⁶⁶ Al-Qa`ida waged a deadly terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006 in which the group targeted Westerners, Saudi oil facilities, the Ministry of the Interior, and the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, in addition to other housing.⁶⁷

While the attack has not undermined U.S.-Saudi relations, it is certainly possible that more rigorous vetting requirements, combined with lingering stigma from the attack, could potentially impact the ability of the two countries to partner on counterterrorism missions in the future, shaping the nature of U.S. security cooperation programs with Saudi Arabia, leading to a less robust relationship over time.

Issue 3: Vetting for Security Cooperation Programs

The attack led members of Congress to call for increased scrutiny on the security cooperation and training exchange programs that the U.S. military participates in within the United States with foreign countries. Previously, attention has focused on training programs overseas. The U.S. military has suffered numerous so-called ‘green-on-blue’ attacks in Afghanistan, where members of the partner nation’s military being trained by Americans turn their weapons against U.S. soldiers.⁶⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the Pensacola attack, the Department of Defense implemented a

safety and security stand-down and ordered the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security to strengthen the vetting process for the more than 5,000 foreign military students in the United States, while also conducting a comprehensive review of the current policies and procedures for screening foreign military students and granting them base access.⁶⁹ The new vetting standards for training foreign military personnel in the United States were used to screen all Saudi military students in the aftermath of the Pensacola attack, and are part of a personnel vetting transformation initiative.⁷⁰ The initiative combines traditional investigative procedures with automated data record searches that “look at intelligence community-derived data sets that include government data, commercial data, and publicly available data,” according to the March 4, 2020, testimony of Garry Reid, director for defense, intelligence, counterintelligence, law enforcement, and security at the Office of the Under Secretary for Defense for Intelligence and Security.⁷¹

These new standards will inevitably impact various relationships between the U.S. military and many of its partners and allies. In particular, given the intensive nature of the personnel vetting transformation described by Reid, it is questionable whether the U.S. military will be able to sustain the rate at which it trains military personnel from Saudi Arabia and other partner countries in the fight against terrorism. Accordingly, the net result of the Pensacola attack could very well be fewer American-trained partner forces combating terrorism in their home nations. In regions like the Arabian Peninsula, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, the fallout could be significant.

There are always going to be challenges to identifying individuals who are radicalized and who are planning to conduct a terrorist attack, however this incident raises serious questions about the previous security/threat vetting procedures employed by both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Given that Alshamrani’s Twitter account demonstrated an affinity for extremist ideology dating back to 2015, it begs the question why Saudi authorities failed to uncover Alshamrani’s radicalization. The internal Saudi report suggests that Alshamrani’s Twitter account did not display his full name and contained no pictures or biographical information that would have allowed authorities to ascertain his identity.⁷² Still, the account did have his first and last name in Arabic and was tied to several posts which, at least after the fact, made it clear Alshamrani was responsible for operating the account and its content.⁷³

The Pentagon’s initial reaction was to suspend training for 852 Saudi students while it conducted a more thorough investigation. In addition to those individuals, an additional 5,000-plus international students were subjected to extra scrutiny as part of a broader security review.⁷⁴ On January 14, 2020, the United States announced that it was expelling 21 Saudi military students from a training program after it was discovered that these individuals were linked to child pornography and violent extremism.⁷⁵ The Justice Department’s criminal investigation into the incident discovered that while there was not any evidence that other members of the Saudi military had preexisting knowledge of the attack, 21 of these individuals possessed “derogatory material,” 17 of whom were found to be participating in social media exchanges that contained jihadi-related content.⁷⁶

In addition to stricter vetting standards to determine who is eligible to participate in security

cooperation programs, the Pentagon also announced that it would be imposing more stringent regulations on those students who do arrive in the United States, detailing new limitations on travel within the country, possession of firearms, and access to U.S. military bases and other facilities.⁷⁷ Still, on January 21, 2020, the Pentagon offered conditional approval for resuming training Saudi nationals “once the military services have met certain conditions.”⁷⁸ In a press conference two days later, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper noted that vetting changes will be “far more comprehensive” and entail a more thorough background investigation of potential foreign military students, including an examination of their social media accounts and interactions, as well as “continuous monitoring” during their stay in the United States.⁷⁹

Issue 4: Privacy Versus Security

The U.S. Department of Justice requested that Apple provide access to the data stored on two iPhones that were used by the gunman prior to the attack.⁸⁰ Alshamrani attempted to destroy both phones, and FBI director Christopher Wray confirmed that Alshamrani put a bullet through one of the phones in his possession.⁸¹ And although FBI crime lab experts have since repaired both of the phones, they have been unable, as far as is publicly known at the time of publication, to access the data stored on them.⁸² The phones remain locked and encrypted, despite efforts by the U.S. government to persuade Apple to offer more help.⁸³

In a January 2020 press conference, FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich stated:

*Even with a court order, to date we cannot access the contents of two phones in this investigation—and countless devices in other investigations. We want to work together with private sector companies, so that we can lawfully access the evidence and information we need to keep our country safe.*⁸⁴

The case is similar to the aftermath of the December 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, when a husband and wife team inspired by the Islamic State killed 14 people and injured two dozen more at an office holiday party.⁸⁵ In the San Bernardino case, the FBI worked with a private sector firm to access the encrypted data stored on the male shooter’s iPhone.⁸⁶

Apple chief executive officer Tim Cook has been under pressure⁸⁷ surrounding allegations that his company has not fully cooperated with DoJ in the investigation into the Pensacola attack.⁸⁸ Apple asserts that building a so-called “back door” into its devices would make all of its iPhones more vulnerable to being hacked by criminals, terrorists, or rogue governments seeking to monitor their own citizens.⁸⁹ As is well understood, in many cases, especially regarding authoritarian governments, this would provide them with the opportunity to monitor, harass, and arrest political opponents unfairly labeled and inaccurately characterized as dissidents. In the San Bernardino case, and again with Pensacola, Apple has argued that if the company cedes to FBI demands over unlocking Alshamrani’s phone, it would be compelled by governments in Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere to act in a similar and consistent manner.⁹⁰ The issue of a back door is also a clear example of the privacy versus security debate, with a host of unanswered and fiercely debated legal, moral, and ethical implications.⁹¹

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

As far as is publicly known, as of late March 2020, the FBI was still struggling to access Alshamrani's encrypted Apple iPhones despite probable cause and a court authorization. The FBI investigation has involved more than 500 interviews and the collection of more than 42 terabytes of digital media.⁹² The claim of responsibility from AQAP has likely created an even greater sense of urgency for the FBI, which is seeking to work closely with the private sector to lawfully access potential evidence. This could help identify key figures in the broader network involved in the attack. Such links have thus far not been apparent, and while the FBI initially noted that it had "not identified any solid evidence that the shooter acted with any co-conspirators or that he was inspired by a specific group," the claim by AQAP could lead the bureau to revisit this assessment.⁹³

Indeed, the potential AQAP link makes the information and data stored on Alshamrani's phones that much more critical to the investigation. Gaining access to this data could furnish the U.S. government with further insight into Alshamrani's activities, exactly what kind of jihadi propaganda he was viewing, and who he was in touch with in the months leading up to the attack. This could confirm or dispel AQAP's claim of responsibility. If, for example, investigators were able to retrieve his purported last will and testament (apparently typed up on iPhone Notes that was shown in the AQAP claim video) from Alshamrani's iPhones, it would add credence to AQAP's claims.

The issue of private companies providing the U.S. federal government with access to data from individuals' phones does indeed raise serious concerns over privacy. This is not an issue that will resolve itself. Moving forward, it will be essential for the government and Silicon Valley to work together to make tangible progress. The ideal solution is one that protects the privacy of law-abiding citizens while also lawfully granting authorities with access to user data on mobile devices in specific cases of investigating terrorism.⁹⁴ Given the complexity of encryption, it may not be possible for both sides to reach what they each view as a reasonable compromise, given the legitimate concerns of both the government and private sector corporations.

The Alshamrani attack has not so far significantly affected the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and is unlikely to do so during the tenure of the Trump administration. Ties between Washington and Riyadh have clearly overcome more turbulent periods, including the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the year that followed the Khashoggi murder and the numerous revelations that influential Saudi government officials had knowledge of his assassination.⁹⁵ The more immediate impact of the Pensacola attack is that it will likely cause complications for U.S. efforts to engage in security cooperation with foreign governments, long a lynchpin of U.S. defense policy. As the United States continues to consider drawing down forces in unstable regions around the globe, from West Africa to South Asia, Washington will likely need to rely more than ever on efforts to build partner capacity to supplant a dwindling commitment of U.S. troops in unstable countries.⁹⁶ Working 'by, with, and through' partner nations and continuing programs to train, advise, and assist U.S. allies to counter terrorism will inevitably be impacted by more stringent vetting procedures, including the personnel vetting transformation initiative, which will ultimately be applied to the more than 5,000 foreign military students in the United States.⁹⁷ The current challenge of the coronavirus (COVID-19)

will be another major obstacle to the exchange and training of students. Per guidance issued by the United States Army, foreign military students from countries with CDC alert level category 2 and above for COVID-19 will not participate in U.S. scheduled exercises, exchanges, or visits.⁹⁸

The Pensacola attack demonstrates that a number of failures occurred throughout the security cooperation vetting process. And while all efforts should be made to manage and limit the risk, security cooperation is just one facet of a broader relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and building partner capacity programs do indeed provide a benefit to both Washington and Riyadh, particularly in counterterrorism operations. Taken together, this demonstrates that even as the threat can be mitigated by stricter and more comprehensive vetting standards, as the Alshamrani attack proves, it can never be altogether eliminated and exists as a tradeoff in the broader realm of U.S. foreign and security policy. **CTC**

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Substantive Notes

[a] References to the AQAP tape are based on the author's work in tandem with a translator who is a native Arabic speaker, in order to ensure that the literal translation provided the most accurate verbiage and that there was no room for error or misinterpretation. At certain points, the translation of what al-Rimi said in Arabic differs from the subtitle AQAP provided. Perhaps most importantly, while the subtitles used the phrase "full responsibility" in reference to the attack, the literal translation is "adoption." This could be the result of poor translation by AQAP, which is the most likely explanation, but it could also be a deliberate attempt to send mixed messages. While "full responsibility" is more indicative of communication, command, and control, "adoption" could suggest a much looser link to the attack and could be read to suggest that AQAP was merely approving of and attempting to express strong solidarity with Alshamrani after the attack.

[b] Alshamrani was issued a hunting license on July 11, 2019, by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and purchased the weapon used in the attack nine days later from a federally licensed firearms dealer in Florida, Uber's Lock and Gun in Pensacola. Alshamrani was also in possession of an extended magazine, several additional magazines, and approximately 180 rounds of ammunition. Under U.S. law, there are several exceptions that allow for foreigners who have been lawfully admitted to the country to purchase and own a firearm. In May 2019, the FBI issued a warning about the hunting license loophole in a report titled "Federal Hunting License Exception Could be Exploited by Extremists or Criminal Actors Seeking to Obtain Firearms for Violent Attacks," which was issued to by the bureau's private sector outreach team. See [Patricia Mazzei and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Restricts Training for Saudi Military Students," *New York Times*, December 12, 2019;](#) [Janita Kan, "Attorney General](#)

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